

## CHAPTER 10

# EXPERIENTIAL KNOWING WITH THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

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### Abstract

Co-operative inquiry emerged in the 1970s, recognising the impossibility of conducting authentic research in the social sciences without engaging with persons as aware, self-directing beings. The approach asserts that people have a right to contribute to knowledge that purports to be about them. It acknowledges that because it is politically empowering, this can lead to political struggle. Lately, it has become clear that these arguments can and should be extended to apply to the more-than-human world, thus re-centering previously marginalised relational knowledges and voices. Recent work has focused particularly on the agency of place, such as River. In this chapter, we reflect upon the philosophy and practice of co-operative inquiry for life, in re-engagement with the more-than-human world. Most modern Western humans have been socialised to draw a distinct line between humans and other-than-human, to see a world open to exploitation. In contrast, we draw on living cosmos panpsychism (Mathews, 2003, 2019) to see a world in which all beings, including humans, are part of an intelligent and evolving cosmos. We seek experiential, conceptual, creative, and practical responses to questions such as: *What would it be like to live in a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects?*

**Key words:** Co-operative inquiry, More-than-human world, Agency of place, Living cosmos panpsychism

## Opening

Zen masters teach us not to seek the extraordinary, not to look for special or 'sacred' places. To see that which is special stops us from seeing what is before our eyes: the specialness of the everyday, how everything rolls together in being and non-being, how we are every moment part of a living planet. (Reason, 2017, p. 203)

The point of this chapter is to learn how to pay attention; to notice relationships and the agency<sup>1</sup> of the other-than-human world. Through the intimate human association nurtured by the practice of co-operative inquiry, we can learn to look and look again in association with others, allowing an occluded view of the world to open. This is a living, sentient<sup>2</sup> world, in Thomas Berry's words, a community of subjects, not a collection of objects (1988). This world is not only sentient but also communicative; a community in mutual contact and communication, co-creating a 'poetic ecology'. We, humans, bring to it—or can bring to it, if we choose—an attention that calls it forth on a new expressive plane, a plane of meaning and not merely of causation.

We need to re-learn how to do this. Many moderns live in a world alienated from relationships and relational knowing; they see the world as separate objects, as brutish matter (Ghosh, 2021). This worldview disavows the body and the fundamental interconnectedness of knowing (Abram, 1996; Mueller, 2017). It is arguably at the root of the ecological catastrophe that is currently unfolding, now faster than predicted. This is evidenced by the biodiversity crises across the planet (Díaz et al., 2019); the 2022 devastating floods in Pakistan described by the United Nations as climate carnage (United Nations, 2022); and many more unnatural disasters. As a case in point, the state of the Australian environment is poor and the outlook is deteriorating (Cresswell et al., 2021). The Australian climate has warmed by about 1.5°C, sea surface temperatures have increased, extreme fire weather has increased, and river and stream flows have decreased in most

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<sup>1</sup> For us, agency means to oversee one's own life, and to be capable of influencing others. This applies to the more-than-human world as well, in the sense of being able to respond, affect or independently impact place or others.

<sup>2</sup> By sentient or sentience, we refer to a capacity to feel, experience and/or consciously act. We recognise that individuals, places, and the cosmos are sentient, and that perhaps our cultural conditioning has prevented this awareness. "Eventually you may feel the entire planet nurturing you with life energy." These are the words of Harding, S. (2022). *Gaia alchemy: The reuniting of science, psyche and soul*. Inner Traditions Bear and Company. Sentience relates to sensing and sensation.

regions across the continent since 1975 (CSIRO, 2022). Some say these calamities are consequences of humans learning to think in ways that privilege theory and abstract knowledge, even while ignoring the consequences of these actions and one's own experiences, observations, feelings, values, and sentiments (Mathews, 2017b).

We briefly explain. In post-Cartesian philosophy there is a schism between rationality and nature. This is part of a mind/matter dualism, a metaphysic that regards both the human body and 'nature' as exterior (and inferior) to an internalised mind (Plumwood, 1993). Using this logic, the mind comprehends one's body and world from a separate, internal location. For this reason, Westerners may not recognise contrasting evidence—a bird visitation in response to a call to River, perhaps—because the world around us is seen as non-responsive; and bodily experiences, feelings, and senses are trivialised or relegated. It seems to us that *un*learning is required, along with removal of the modern narrative of human exceptionalism.

In this chapter, we seek experiential, conceptual, creative, and practical responses to questions of the kind: What would it be like to live in a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects? How would we relate to such a world? How might we listen to rivers, and learn to relate in ways that reveal ancient knowledges often occluded by the mechanisms of the West? What are the implications of these questions, observations, and responses for education?

We briefly review the environmental humanities to explore practices of noticing, before investigating Freya Mathews' (2021) living cosmos panpsychism in which all beings, including humans, are part of an intelligent and evolving cosmos. We introduce the practice of co-operative inquiry, an approach to living life as an inquiry for deepening engagement within local more-than-human<sup>3</sup> worlds. We offer journal entries of our daily practice, to illustrate the wonder in and of the everyday, after which we draw methodological and educational implications.

## Noticing

Writers in the environmental humanities cultivate the arts of noticing—to observe, attend to, listen, smell, sense, and otherwise fully engage (Harding, 2009; Tsing, 2021). To closely attend is to recognise the world anew, to

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<sup>3</sup> In this and other contexts, we use the term more-than-human to avoid notions of human exceptionalism. It is to include humans within a community of beings.

recultivate a sense of wonder—or perhaps a sense of horror. It is to bring entanglements to the experiential, visual/imaginal, and practical realms of existence, rather than just the theoretical (Van Dooren, 2022). It is to be fully human in a more-than-human world (Mueller, 2017). Marshall (2001) writes about paying attention, but not with an ecological focus. She writes, “I work with a multi-dimensional frame of knowing; acknowledging and connecting between intellectual, emotional, practical, intuitive, sensory, imaginal and more knowings” (2001, p. 434). Below, we offer a narrative of noticing, to bring to focus different senses and ways of becoming reacquainted with places we live with.

Tsing (2021) notices networks of all kinds including patterns of unintentional coordination apparent in assemblages. She thinks-with matsutake mushrooms, the most valuable in the world, being a weed that grows in disturbed forests and environmental messes in the Northern hemisphere. For her, matsutake suggests attention to seasons and precarious living in the present. In describing a visit to the tanoak forests of coastal Oregon, where stumps of logged Douglas fir provide likely matsutake habitat, tanoak leaves covered the ground like a rug, and she commented on the seeming impossibility of finding mushrooms underneath. She was shown how to feel the leaves with her hands alone, “a new way to learn the forest” (Tsing, 2021, p. 278), illustrating the depths of awareness which many of us may acquire.

Mueller’s (2017) observations and description of the deep interrelationship between humans and salmon, causes him to wonder if working to save the salmon might be the salmon working to save the human; and whether earth might be experiencing itself through so many of these different kinds of embodied awareness, be they dragonfly, Sitka spruce, salmon, human, or whale. To recognise interrelationships not previously noticed, may enable creative ways of extending the act of knowing.

Van Dooren (2022) notes that in this era of colonisation and extinctions, snails rarely get a mention in the West, even though they are intricately interwoven with Hawaii tradition and cultural practice. He writes snail stories to animate a sense of wonder for snails and their worlds, to acknowledge lives at the edge of extinction; and to face the unravelling and deep wounding taking place at this point in history. While he was visiting Hawaii one time in 2019, the last snail (named George) of the species *Achatinella apexfulva*, passed away. For him, the point of paying close attention is to learn to observe, notice relationships, respond, inspire to transform, and perhaps understand the world afresh.

A five-day meeting of artists, musicians, environmentalists, and Indigenous custodians took place at a remote cattle station in central Australia, a site Mathews (2009) refers to as utterly beautiful. Referring to the event, she writes about Dreaming stories for the specific Country<sup>4</sup> being told by Indigenous custodians, and an ethnobotanist speaking lovingly of each plant he pointed out while leading a walking tour. She says at several points, different individuals noticed their activities forming poetic scenarios or narratives they had not previously imagined, yet these were perfectly suited to the circumstances. In other words, place-love and respect can bring a communicative response. For example:

Each time we came to a gap in the proceedings, it was as if the land, or the world, stepped in, and offered poetic comments or denouements that exceeded anything we could have devised. There was a breathtaking display of lightning, for instance, just at a particular ‘flat spot’ in the women’s final performance of place; multitudes of actual frogs gathered on the slope leading down to the riverbed just after the men had performed a frog dance; crucial conversations were punctuated, at just the right moments, with expressive bird calls; ... It felt like a coming alive of the world, a flow of configurations of circumstances along axes of meaning. (Mathews, 2009, p. 2)

This narrative illustrates the significance of beginning with open-minded sensory observations—of what is in front of us. We need to recognise those things we learned *not* to notice because those experiences may not fit the Western ‘everyday’ worldview or its explanations. We need to learn to feel, see or hear previously unimagined possibilities, especially those we may have blocked out because of theories or beliefs we already hold. This calls for a philosophical exploration to consider the nature of reality.

### Living cosmos panpsychism

As guidance for a series of co-operative inquiry ventures, we have drawn on Freya Mathews’ ‘living cosmos panpsychism’ (2021) through which we can understand all beings, including humans, as part of a sentient, evolving cosmos. An important dimension of this approach is that instead of attempting to understand the world and *representing* it with theory, panpsychism shows that our task is to *participate with* the world to make meaning. Mathews teaches that the challenge for a philosopher is not how

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<sup>4</sup> In Australia, when capitalised Country refers to a more complex notion than that of the standard usage. It is an Indigenous meaning that includes spirituality, social systems, well-being, kinship, and obligations to care for Country.

to think *about* the world, but to offer perspectives that enable us to *live in* and *participate with* the world (Mathews, 2017c).

In the living cosmos panpsychic perspective, some kind of innerness is as fundamental to the nature of reality as is matter (Mathews, 2003, 2019, 2023). In this sense, there can be no brute matter of the type suggested by physics. We might think of the cosmos as a consistent field of mind-matter, a self-actualising meaning-making whole with a concern for its own continuation and self-increase. It has its own *conatus*, the will or impulse to realise and increase its own existence and reach towards its full potential. (Mathews, 2021). This One field of mind-matter self-differentiates into Many: distinct, self-realising, mutually responsive beings, that is, the gum tree, salmon, snail, mycelium, and you and me, majestic yet impermanent centres of action. Each is a system, a self, as is the cosmos (Mathews, 2023).

Using living cosmos panpsychism, we recognise the cosmos as a communicative, responsive order of meaning/s, unfolding together within the causal, material order. As a community of subjects, the Many reaches for each other in reciprocal communication, co-creating a ‘poetic ecology’: the foundational erotics of touching the world and being touched by it in return (Mathews, 2021). Participation in this living world of relationality, is a foundational experience of reality. The expression of meaning does not radiate solely from the human side. The world is capable of, actively seeks, engagement with humans, enabling the possibility of a “communicative encounter, of reciprocal presence, a presence that *answers back* when our questions send out tentacles of attention in search of it” (Mathews, 2017a, p. 223). This way, the world inscribes our lives with meanings of its own, offering defining conduits for our agency. Hence all things, including the Earth, are vital to the composition of the *living cosmos*, all the same sentient cloth.

Mathews has developed practical theories of a communicative order in living systems. She names the living, communicative order of things ontopoetics, while the causal order of things is physics. Ontopoetics is, “the study of the poetic order, the poetic meanings that structure the core of things” (Mathews, 2009, p. 15). She contends that the communicative order will structure further interchanges when we choose to participate with those meanings. As well, living cosmos panpsychism has a moral dimension that is relevant to everyday practice and contemporary society. This suggests that we should seek to align ourselves with the performative intelligence in the way things are, and act in accordance with it. In other words, a moral ‘Ought’ exists at the core of the ‘Is’ (Mathews, 2021), that is, we ‘ought’ to

act in accord with the communicative order of things. This is a “Law of the living Cosmos”, which “permeates the very fabric of existence” (Mathews, 2023, p. 39), a normative imperative. Mathews (2021, 2023) explains that the ‘Law of the living cosmos’ is particularly discernible in the unfolding of living systems, as a synergistic pattern characterised by the twin principles of conativity or striving for self-actualisation, and mutual accommodation/least resistance. This has great similarities with the Indigenous principle of Law of the Land, with its relational ethos (Mathews, 2023; Poelina et al., 2020).

Mathews asserts that scientific materialism has brought devastating technologies and commodities, which have *untaught* us moderns how to live (2021). We now need to learn how to live anew, in accordance with the Law of the Living Cosmos and the Law of the Land. This requires an agential, reciprocal, direct way of relating-with the world; entirely different to the world mainly known through theoretical abstractions separate from the world. In summary, panpsychism is conducive to an experiential, direct engagement with the world, such as co-operative inquiry, one that is reflective in creative and conceptual ways.

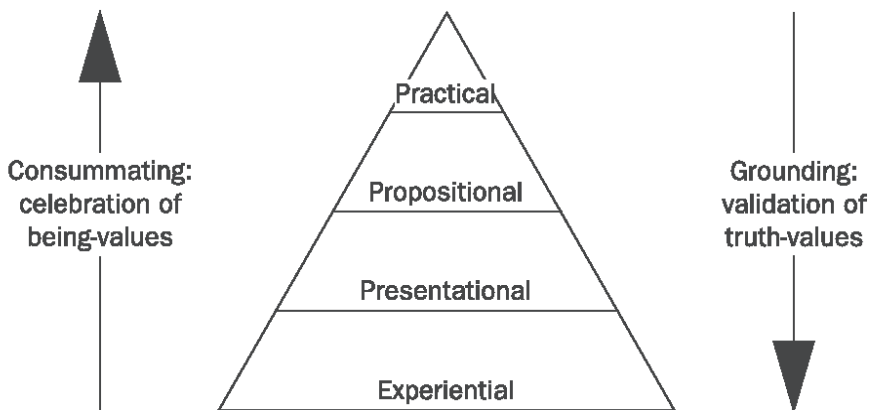
### Co-operative inquiry

A co-operative inquiry has two or more persons exploring a topic through their own experience of it, utilising a series of cycles in which they move between their experience and reflecting on it together. The research method began in earnest in the 1970s, after recognising the importance of conducting authentic research in the social sciences while engaging with persons as aware, self-directing beings (Reason, 2002). Co-operative inquiry was originally associated with the humanistic quest for personal and social transformation aligned with the values of autonomy, co-operation and holistic body-mind. It envisioned persons inquiring together in reciprocal relation, using the full range of their sensibilities, into any aspect of the human condition (Reason & Heron, 1997).

Lately, it has become clear that these arguments can and should be extended to apply to the more-than-human world, thus re-centering previously marginalised relational knowledges and voices. Recent work has focused particularly on the agency of place, such as River (Kurio & Reason, 2021; Riley & Reason, in press). There are now many approaches to researching the place-human experiential relationship, and one of us has referred to co-operative inquiry as a post-qualitative research method. As we understand

it, this includes and is greater than qualitative research in that it is no longer confined to responses by humans alone (Poelina et al., 2022).

Co-operative inquiry is an iterative process in which co-researchers engage in cycles of action and reflection through an extended epistemology—that is, extended from the rational-empirical categories of traditional research. This epistemology embraces experiential knowing through meeting and encounter; presentational knowing through aesthetic, creative, and expressive forms; propositional knowing through words, concepts, and critique; and finally, participative, or practical knowing in the exercise of diverse skills—which may be physical, interpersonal, attentional, and/or political. Practical knowing is the epitome of prior forms of knowing, involving the whole body-mind. These forms of knowing are brought to bear upon each other through inquiry cycles to enhance their mutual congruence, both within each inquirer and the inquiry group. See Figure 10.1 for a visual explanation of one cycle of fourfold knowing. The process is cycled perhaps many times. We suggest the process is continuous for lifelong learning.



**Figure 10.1:** Pyramid of Fourfold Knowing. One co-operative inquiry cycle. (Heron, 1996, p. 53)

In some research methods, the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive: the researcher only contributes the thinking that goes into the project, and the subjects only contribute the action to be studied (Heron & Reason, 2011). In co-operative inquiry these exclusive roles are replaced by mutual relationships, so all involved work together as both co-researchers and co-subjects. Everyone is engaged in the design and management of the



inquiry; everyone gets into the experience and action that is being explored; everyone is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions; everyone engages in all cycles of action and reflection. One of the innovations of co-operative inquiry is the attention to forms of knowing that traditional research may be less interested in, such as experiential, artistic/creative and practical forms of knowing (Riley & Reason, in press).

There are two action and two reflection phases in co-operative inquiry. *Phase one* is reflection on the focus and nature of the inquiry. It is to agree on the inquiry question, clarify the inquiry topic, plan the first action phase, and decide on the recording methods for experiences. Phase two is action. It is to engage whole heartedly in the experience as agreed, inquiring into the question in an intentional way. Phase three is to build upon and deepen the experience in embodied, creative, presentational, or propositional ways. During phase four, co-researchers meet and reflect upon the original questions. They may decide to continue the same inquiry or amend the questions and direction for the next inquiry cycle. Here, the first cycle ends. When the second inquiry cycle begins, phase one is less naïve than in the earlier cycle, because there is experience, creativity, newly developed propositions, and embodied practice to build upon (Reason, 2002). In the approach we advocate, this cycling may continue—for life, perhaps, to enable the acquisition and practice of new skills and ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Whilst co-operative inquiry has its original roots in humanistic psychology (Wicks et al., 2008) our recent work has extended this to include other-than-human persons. Co-operative inquiry has several features, through which human communities can develop relational knowing with the more-than-human world. These are: it treats those involved—both human and other-than-human persons—as subjective, autonomous beings who are potentially equivalent participants in the inquiry process; it gives emphasis to the experiential ground of knowing as foundation for the poetics of presentation; and it affirms that practice is primary (Kurio & Reason, 2022). Whereas it may be said that much research has a propositional bias, co-operative inquiry has a bias toward practical knowing as the consummation of inquiry in worthwhile action in the world. Co-operative inquiry is guided by propositional knowing, inspired by presentational forms of knowing, and grounded in and continually reinvigorated through experiential encounter (Heron & Reason, 2011). Our emphasis in the present chapter is on experiential knowing, with its attention to deepening and widening our attention to phenomena, because the urgent task is to re-center relational knowledges and the agency of the more-than-human.

## First and second person experiential inquiry

Having introduced living cosmos panpsychism and the co-operative inquiry method, we now show how first- and second-person experiential inquiry can be drawn on, to bring this perspective into everyday life. We begin with the notion of living life as inquiry, a first-person action research for life (Marshall, 2016). This involves a person taking up an inquiry approach to all they think, do, and feel. It is an embodied and reflective process of being curious about one's perspectives, assumptions, and actions; and is dynamic and critical. It involves an aspiration to ongoing learning, keeping in mind such properties of dynamic systems as connectedness, the tenacity of patterns, resilience, and emergence. Marshall (2016) emphasises systems thinking, recognising that parts cannot change without some shift in the systemic pattern, while acknowledging that parts can influence change in the system. It is this stance we bring to this co-operative inquiry, as first-person researchers sharing and reflecting upon our experiences of a sentient world.

We link this process of 'first-person' inquiry to the 'second-person' practice of co-operative inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) which provides a context for each person's investigations. Second-person inquiry describes action research approaches with two or more people inquiring together, having an aspiration to form a community for investigating questions of mutual concern (Marshall, 2016). The process we use integrates first person inquiring into the individual experience of engaging with their river and returning to the group to discuss and share findings with others who have also engaged with their rivers.

In the inquiries we have initiated over the past three years, primarily through the short course program at Schumacher College in Devon, England, we have invited human participants, in collaboration with rivers worldwide, to join us in addressing the questions we identified above: *What would it be like to live in a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects? How would we relate to such a world? And if we invoke such a world of sentient presence, calling to other-than-human beings as persons, might we elicit a response? Implicit in these questions is another: How might we listen to rivers, and learn to relate in ways that reveal ancient knowledges often occluded by the mechanisms of the West?*

At the time of writing, these inquiries have involved around fifty participant co-inquirers in relation to rivers across the planet. As initiating facilitators, we invite participants to start from the following inquiry protocol:

- We will visit our Rivers, exploring how to invoke presence and attend for response at least once a week.
- We will compose accounts of our experience (prose/poetry/drawing/photos), and share with the group for feedback and discussion.
- We will meet on Zoom weekly to reflect on the previous week's encounter with rivers and decide how we might proceed the following week.
- We commit to engaging in this way for six weeks, with a possibility for further engagement in the future.

Thus, our second person river inquiries start from the assumptions of living cosmos panpsychism. We engage in cycles of inquiry: visiting our rivers regularly to explore different approaches to invocation; finding initial presentational form in writing, photography, video, poetry, and drawing; meeting weekly to share experiences and make sense together; and deciding the practical actions we should take in the subsequent cycle (Kurio & Reason, 2022). Finally, joining together in collective reflection we do our best to make sense and draw out themes.

The co-operative inquiry groups create a context for first-person inquiry, opening for both encouragement and critique. They also provide a wealth of experience from which we intend in time to draw some general conclusions as to how modern humans can open themselves to a sentient world. In the present writing we limit ourselves to vignettes drawn from our personal journals. We have deliberately chosen excerpts that show the ordinariness of this work: we want to draw attention to the specialness in the everyday.

Our daily experience is to walk along or sit beside rivers or wetlands. There are two ways in which this is a second person inquiry, which involves people co-inquiring into questions of mutual concern (Marshall, 2016). The first way is that our learnings are later shared with human co-inquirers to conceptualise and more deeply understand experience. The second way is to interpret 'people' as persons of all species. As explanation, a philosophy of living cosmos panpsychism sees all beings as co-subjects within a communicative order rather than separated objects in an inert, unfeeling world. As personal response, this calls for an ecological or reconnecting sense of self that is inherently enmeshed in a field of relations (Mathews, 2021). Meaningfulness in this metaphysic is a quality of mind-nature, where mind is implicated in the field of relations, without privilege or separation. There is no possessiveness here, only mutual selves which is, in the end, a moral position at the heart of the cosmos (Mathews, 2021). This is second person inquiry.

### ***On living life as inquiry in England: Peter's reflection on practice***

March 7, 2022. (Very early spring.) Notes from River.

Here is a sample of journal writing. I regularly rise before daylight and drive then walk to a little sitting place beside some fallen branches, near the confluence of the Frome and Avon rivers. My practice is to visit and sit with rivers, listening, observing, participating. I do this a couple of times per week.

Lately, I've been giving thought to ceremony to show respect to the living presence of River. I've been reflecting on qualities like grace, following my book called *In search of grace: An ecological pilgrimage*. The book records my trip sailing a small yacht called Coral around the British Isles.

It's so quiet. No human noises. Standing on the bridge I catch the glint of the water and the bubbling of the stream under the bridge. The sky is already brightening in the east with the first hints of dawn; in the west it is dark still but with the glow of light from the town. The cockerel keeps calling, he definitely thinks it's morning! I go through the kiss gate into the field; when I get to the middle I stand in the field and just listen; it is almost silent. There's the owl calling, a background hiss of traffic, and the drone of a plane high above. No breeze, everything very, very still.

As I walk across the field, crows begin to call, just solitary voices at first as if waking up. I notice the glint of the Frome River to my left through the trees. As I get closer to my spot at the confluence of the two rivers, I feel the world opens, there's a spaciousness. I stand at the base of the little peninsula with the Avon to my right, skeletal trees reflecting in the smooth water. There is the glimmer of the morning light catching on the water; a shimmer that takes my attention. I reflect on the concept of shimmer, described as 'ancestral power' by Australian environmental humanities academic Deborah Bird Rose (Bird Rose, 2017). There is so much going on here, and much we have to learn. I am learning to pay attention.

I bow to Rivers. Even though I have the audio recorder going and so have a certain self-consciousness, I hold the intent to let go of my sense of separate self and be part of the wider whole. "Good morning, Rivers, Good morning. Here I am again. Thank you for being here. Thank you for your teachings over these years". I call the powers of the Four Directions. I call the power of the East, I call for new illuminations and insights, for new beginnings. I call the power of the West. I call for deep intuition, for an experiential knowing that deepens my sense of living in a sentient world, moment by moment. I ask that I learn that deep sense of continuity, being part of the living cosmos. I call to the south. I call for the children. I call the power of the north. I call for wisdom. I call for the wisdom of the four-footed ones. I

call for wisdom for our culture at this terrible and ridiculous time. Blessed be. What else is there to say?

I sit on the bank opposite the willow tree reflected in the dark silver of the river. The birds waken around me: tweets of wrens, tits, the caw of crows, the quack of a duck, the honk of a pheasant, now and again an owl. A thrush seems to be calling out ‘do you agree? Do you agree?’ Now there is a line of pale orange along the horizon; it’s much lighter. I soften my gaze and attend to the birdsong. I find this leads me to feel less separate.

### *On living life as inquiry in Australia: Sandra’s reflection on practice*

November 5, 2022. (Spring). Notes from River walk: Evening.

Here is an excerpt from a piece of journal writing. I regularly visit the Leschenault Estuary and Collie River, Wardandi Country, South West Australia.

I am walking along the Leschenault Estuary on wet sand, where the high watermark meets dry sand and salt tolerant vegetation. I feel at home here. I sing out to *Ngangungudditj walgu*<sup>5</sup> (Northover, 2008) the hairy faced snake, and tell him it is me, Sandra. I mention that when I sing out in that way, I feel *Estuary* ‘opening out’—breathing—and starting to engage, becoming alive, becoming responsive. I accept this is my response—because *Estuary* is always awake, breathing with tidal rhythms and responsivities. However, I get out of my business-as-usual mind frame, and I respond. I feel beckoned to walk in the water. Evening is a stunning time of day when the place is full of energy. I feel the lure, the magnetism of Estuary. I cannot participate with Estuary without feeling ‘alive’, without feeling a zing in my step. I passed the casuarina trees and continued to the confluence of the Leschenault Estuary and the Collie River near Bar Island. I sing out again, and in an otherwise slightly wavy, very lightly wind-reactive surface, I notice beside me a glassy, shimmering, radiant, and openly welcoming patch of River. Transfixed, I breathe in the sacredness of River while I absorb its majesty. After several minutes of silent awe, I continued my walk.

I turn east and am walking alongside Collie River now. Here I feel that River calls me to family attentiveness and response-ability. I feel this is my heartland. I sing out to River again, and—as if in direct response—a school of

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<sup>5</sup> I give respect to the Wardandi Noongar people of this area—past, present and emerging. I acknowledge the Noongar Elders and teachers who have taught me Noongar language and Stories over the years, with whom I have worked and learned. I thank you for this privilege.

white bait leap out of the water, flashing and shimmering in the evening sun. While walking, I use imagination to visualise a Noongar (Indigenous) sense of time as pastpresence, in this Wardandi Noongar Country. I walk where people live together with more-than-human worlds within the river environs. This is a long now, where past and present fuse in [seasonal] time, so that as I look around, I understand that all that has been here is still present as species or in spirit, shadow, or out of sight. I visualise myself relating to all things, within nature. I later reflected that I was seeing many more connections than I usually do. I also noticed these perceptive abilities stay with me—this is a way of upskilling.

In this Story, I visualise a Noongar sense of time, part of the Noongar cultural worldview of this long-peopled place (Poelina et al., 2020), to enhance recognition, to ‘see’ more. We are all response-able—that is, we have an ability to respond (Bawaka Country et al., 2019; Northover, 2008). This is my daily practice, usually recording notes, photographs, or video clips. I walk co-operatively with other-than-human beings while reconnecting through River communications. I feel embodied knowing through experience.

### Shared reflection—Peter and Sandra

As mentioned above, these vignettes make no grandiose claim; rather, they are ordinary, everyday. We invite, we sing out, we feel-with, we watch with sensitivity and care, we learn to love more-than-human beings and places, and we recognise the need to *unlearn* no-longer useful binaries and other untruths. We invoke, we hold small ceremonies, we respect the conatus of the beings we meet, and in the respectful spirit of reciprocity, we respond. We become familiar with places—we notice the presence of birds, animals, breezes and winds, and the ways each engages with the other. We draw on our capacity for Imagination, in the sense that Blake used it to open perception to a world of transformed sensory experience; where identity is Imagination as world (Billingsley, 2018). This enables envisioning and recognition of our places and their animate worlds as ecological family (Poelina et al., 2020). We notice sentience everywhere, for sentience and presence surrounds us. We become deeply familiar with places we live with—as relational learners and knowers, recognising ourselves as self-in-relation.

As a practice, at the core of co-operative inquiry is a recognition and abandonment of hierarchical relationships, transforming these to authentic co-operation evidenced by, for example, an experience of the joy and wonder as self-in-world that is steeped in relational identity. The essence is

a sense of connection among self and earth others, such that maintenance of the local living cosmos is the overarching purpose of existence.

### *Methodological implications*

Research that negates the value and primacy of experience and practice, causes researchers and ordinary people to learn to distrust their ordinary observations and everyday experiences. As a system of power, through its assertion of worldview and positionality, traditional research removes people's capacity to engage fully in, or make sense of experience (White et al., 2018). Alternatively, research can enrich experience with perception, such that the visible, tangible, and observed interpenetrate feelings/experiences/imaginal realms and critical/conceptual qualities of reality. This is an important substrate for co-operative inquiry.

We have shown in this chapter that over centuries, the orientation towards theoretical understanding that philosophers and researchers of the West have used, has repressed the communicative, responsive order of the world that surrounds us. It has also, through monopolising knowledge in the hands of the elite, repressed Westerners' own capacities for creating experiential knowing of the world around them. Thus, many have long denied that when we sing out to River, we may be graced with a response. And yet these phenomena are all around us—in rivers, the countryside, and cities—in our faces and our hearts, accessible through our ordinary senses. We are not arguing for the diminution of theories, but we are saying that it is only part of a story: theories can limit, as well as expand, our perception. For flourishing and renewal for all, the everyday empirical beckons our presence, noticing and participation. In the inquiry process, as we engage together and support each other in paying attention to a living world, that world becomes alive to us—partly because we notice more, and partly because the world itself becomes more responsive.

Once we understand we all are part of an intelligent, evolving, and communicative cosmos, we can be open to the whistles, songs, thumps, rustles, and patterns of more-than-human beings seeking reactions from us. We do exist in such a world—sentience surrounds us—and we are called on to relate in a way that is respectful and responsive. Ancient invitations such as these may have been unnoticed by researchers in the West through our scientific materialist history, which has entrenched dualistic thinking into the everyday habits of modernity (Mathews, 2017b). But now things are changing fast. Climate carnage and obliteration are with us, and we know there are new but ancient ways to relate with more-than-human worlds of

beings. We wonder what other voices have been rendered mute by thinking by itself, rather than thinking-with embodied experience. There is much more to the world—a world of perception and experience able to reveal long-occluded knowledges that demonstrate the world may not be as we think.

### **Educational implications**

We encourage teachers and children to respond to the beckons and calls of nature, recognising that liveliness is everywhere. For more on this, see works such as Blaise and Hamm (2020), Rooney et al. (2021) and Wintoneak and Blaise (2022). These authors allow children to respond to the communicative order of places, rather than teachers directing attention to things and giving instructions. Many Indigenous people see Land as a first teacher (Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2019). This is a different position to that of teacher-centred methods of instruction. For these types of experiential and creative/visual/imaginative learning, teachers and students need to leave the classroom, perhaps visiting playgrounds, rivers, wetlands, parks, and beyond to participate in, observe, and practice human responsive capacities over the seasons.

We recommend teachers draw on co-operative inquiry to invite children into cyclical experiences of action and reflection for learning; and to encourage children to learn ‘everyday co-operative inquiry’ as young as possible. By this, we mean enabling students to *discover* how to perceive: how to feel, smell, see and hear; and to acquire multiple creative ways to record and present evidence of a communicative cosmological order. It is not to direct children’s attention though or tell them what teachers see. The relationships we ignore are visible, discernible, and practical, and invitations abound. Using the writings of Mathews (2021), it seems many of us in the West have *unlearned* how to live. Young children are probably more responsive to worldly phenomena, and they have less to *unlearn*.

Once teachers take up co-operative inquiry, we foresee classrooms everywhere being thriving places for learning, participation, creativity, arts, love of life, caring, noticing, relational healing, and transformation. Allowing children to genuinely participate in their reality is to offer hope for a damaged planet, hope for some form of flourishing to return from the ashes of narrow-minded thinking.



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